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ABSTRACT

School board members can use board policies to set the direction for effective instructional management. Effective schools appear to have these characteristics in common: (1) strong instructional leadership by the principal, (2) a safe and orderly atmosphere, (3) high expectations of all students, (4) schoolwide emphasis on basic skills instruction, and (5) systematic monitoring and assessment of student performance. Other research-based strategies for improving student performance are increased time on academic tasks and improved teaching practices. A process for implementing effective instructional management involves establishing systemwide instructional goals, then setting goals for each school. Curriculum, system supervisory practices, and evaluation instruments are all reviewed and, if necessary, revised. The final step is an extensive staff development program. A policy statement by the Mercer County (West Virginia) Board of Education is provided as an example. (MLF)

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Volume 16/Number 4/April 1985

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School boards spend much of their time on matters removed from the teaching and learning process. Yet, when asked, board members speak of their desire to devote more attention to instruction and improving student achievement. They understand that the bottom line for schools is ensuring that knowledge and skills are taught effectively and are learned, that talents are enhanced, and that, ultimately, students are prepared to live challenging and productive lives.

A way for board members to attend to instruction is to use school board policies to set the direction for effective instructional management.

Effective instructional management is basic to educational excellence. It's a bread-and-butter issue. When instructional management is lacking or is ineffective, students end up unprepared for the future . . . and schools lose support. That can't be allowed to happen—and it's avoidable.

Planning is essential

While insufficient funds can interfere with accomplishing goals, too frequently the problem is a lack of coherence in planning and implementing incremental educational improvement. Long term program development is sacrificed for short term gains and the quick fix solution.

But school leaders are redirecting their focus. Two key factors for attaining coherence are surfacing:

- instructional improvements are being grounded in established goals and objectives tied to measurable academic results;
- practical means of systematically managing instruction are emerging.

Using effective instructional management to achieve school improvement intertwines three separate bodies of knowledge:

- research on the factors of school and teacher effectiveness;
- investigations into the link between time and learning;
- studies verifying the application of management principles to the education field.

The result is instruction managed to achieve or more nearly accomplish predetermined educational goals than might be the case otherwise.

Definition

Instructional management, a relatively new term, belongs in the current educational lexicon. But what does it mean?

Instruction can be called the process of providing stimuli (be they knowledge, attitudinal, or behavioral) to a learner so they eventually will be under the learner's control. Instructional management refers to the whole range of this process, including:

- choosing the stimuli;
- assessing the particular learner or learners;
- determining the manner of presentation;
- deciding on a means of judging results;
- determining action(s) to be taken based on the consequences.

Said another way, instructional management is knowing what students should learn; arranging people, programs, materials, and other resources to promote learning; and making appropriate adjustments based on assessments of the results.

Instructional management systems may involve state-of-the-art computer technology and complicated mathematical equations. Sophisticated procedures for student testing and reporting formats also may be part of the instructional management process. Although advanced versions may include some "Buck Rogers" terminology, the basic concept of instructional management is simple to understand and can be implemented legitimately in any school system.

Finally, any definition of effective instructional management must answer the question—effective compared to what? By what yardstick, in other words, will the results of instruction be measured.

The answer: Central to the concept of effective instructional management is the need to reference student learning outcomes against established goals and precedents. An effective instructional management system is one in which all decisions are centered on the achievement of predetermined educational goals.

Common components of instructional management

The four common components of effective instructional management are:

- a set of guiding statements or goals that give directions and provide reference points for measuring results;
- a means of assessing initial instructional needs and entry levels for diagnosing appropriate placements and grouping patterns;
- an organizational structure and instructional delivery process capable of providing alternatives and flexible uses of resources;
- a feedback method for monitoring and recording progress and

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evaluating actual results compared with goals.

These four components are simplified. But don't be fooled. Their implementation can't be accomplished without hard work. Good teachers have been striving to add such tools to their repertoire for centuries.

Teachers and instructional management

Researchers and practitioners have searched diligently for keys to extract the inherent qualities of superior teachers and graft this essence on less endowed instructors. The bulk of the projects have fallen far short of their target. Too often they serve up "teacher proof" materials as substitute products. Many good teachers find these materials insulting, while poor teachers reveal multiple cracks in the notion of "teacher proof."

A fundamental process exists within instructional management that reduces this possibility. Teachers become manipulators of the procedures and shapers of the system rather than the other way around.

Making schools work

Effective instructional management is based partially in the research-based literature on school effectiveness that burgeoned during the 1970s and into the '80s. The general consensus of this body of research is important—what amounts to a profile of an effective school.

Schools that *work* appear to have these characteristics in common:

- strong instructional leadership by the principal;
- a safe and orderly atmosphere;
- high expectations of all students;
- schoolwide emphasis on basic skills instruction;
- systematic monitoring and assessment of student performance.

To these characteristics can be added several other research-based strategies for improving student performance. For example:

- *Increased time on academic tasks.* Academic learning time—the time students spend engaged in appropriate learning tasks, is a major variable in student achievement. If tasks are targeted to produce specific desired learning outcomes and to accommodate the readiness and learning styles of individual students, then more learning time yields increased student achievement.
- *Improved teaching practices.* Research undertaken in classroom settings has identified those teaching and classroom management functions that are most effective in teaching students basic skills and knowledge. In 1982, Allan Odden, director of the programs division, Education Commission of the States, stated that these include:

—direct instruction, including teaching to the whole class or to large groups;

—keeping students on academic tasks and covering extensive curricular content;

—providing highly structured questions that elicit high rates of correct answers from students;

—providing immediate, academically oriented feedback, praising correct answers and exploring incorrect ones;

—monitoring individual student performance during recitation periods and providing individualized feedback;

—long-term staff development emphasizing effective teaching and classroom management, and training principals in instructional management skills and collegial working relationships.

First steps to success

In the real world, day-to-day operations consume so much of the time, energy, and funds of most school boards and school systems that the preplanning of new projects often is shortchanged. Difficulties in educational planning are compounded by the fact that administrators have to deal within a political milieu and historical context to gain support and acceptance of educational innovations.

Given these common conditions, how does a school system implement a program of effective instructional management?

A good first step is to determine the reason for interest in instructional management. Have test scores been less than satisfactory? Are parents or taxpayers demanding accountability? Are teachers searching for methods to improve instructional results? Has the school board implied that youngsters may be slipping through the cracks?

Although situations and organizations vary, usually a team of instructional management planners formulates the philosophical underpinnings of the approach to instructional management for others to review. It's important that the planning team have the expressed endorsements of the superintendent, school board, and others of any basic assumptions and beliefs before development of a system proceeds too far.

Top level commitment is indispensible for success. Why waste everyone's time if the school board disavows the major tenets?

Assess needs

While instructional management models vary among school systems, administrators who are deeply involved with these models agree that a needs assessment should be done early in the process.

A needs assessment is an organized attempt at making informed decisions about needs and the most productive order in which to address them. In addition to determining which disciplines should be involved first in the instructional management process, school administrators also use an assessment to:

- diagnose specific strengths and weaknesses for a single subject;
- measure school climate, attitudes, and morale;
- appraise management practices.

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Leadership: an essential ingredient

Setting up an effective instructional management program—or coalescing existing elements into a systematic whole—is a major undertaking for any school system.

In most cases, the superintendent exhibits the initial leadership for implementing effective instructional management. But school board members, instructional supervisors, curriculum developers, public relations officers, building principals, and teachers all have leadership roles to fulfill as well.

Former Arlington (Va.) superintendent Larry Cuban (currently associate professor at Stanford University) identified a six-step approach for implementing effective instructional management:

- The school board and the superintendent establish systemwide instructional goals, often stated in terms of student outcomes (e.g., test score improvement).
- A goal-setting process is constructed for each school and its classrooms, with school and classroom goals dealing with student outcomes (i.e., aligned with system goals).
- The school system's curriculum is reviewed to determine whether the objectives for subject matter and skills, textbooks, and tests are consistent with what teachers teach in classrooms.
- System supervisory practices and evaluation instruments used in schools and classrooms are revised in light of the focus on student outcomes and research on effective teaching practices (e.g., evaluation of teachers and principals is linked to system and school objectives).
- A monitoring process is mandated to assess progress in reaching system, school, and classroom goals, and information is used to determine program changes and to evaluate staff performance.
- An extensive staff development program is set up for teachers, principals, central office supervisors, and the school board, concentrating on effective teaching, effective schools, and gradual implementation of the other five steps.

School board role

Implementing an instructional management program will be an uphill job if the school board is not behind it fully. To get good results, a school board must be willing to establish instructional management as its highest priority. It must be willing to back up the decision with necessary resources, including funds and high-profile support for the program and staff. School boards can demonstrate their commitment by developing and adopting policies that address instructional management.

For example, the Mercer County (W.Va.) Board of Education has approved a mission statement and three overriding goals (see the box below) for the school system as a first step in a move toward effective instructional management. These statements are contained in the Mercer County policy book. The board and superintendent set the pace through their words and actions.

The first goal, improving student achievement, has received much attention from the school board; it is mentioned at virtually every board meeting. In concrete terms, the board is supporting testing at every grade level to monitor instruction and learning instead of limiting the testing program to grades 3, 6, 9, and 11 as mandated by the state. The school board also is supporting increased staff development, particularly programs that focus on how to use test results to assess needs and develop objectives.

In addition, the biweekly staff newsletter continually stresses this goal by sharing test data and comparing the system's scores within the state, the region, and the school system itself. That information is resulting in each school developing learning objectives to address its assessed needs, e.g., greater emphasis on reading, reference skills, or math.

Information also is shared with the media to keep the community informed about how the schools are doing, what the weaknesses are, and how they are being addressed.

Worth the effort

High expectations are what effective instructional management is all about. When the school board lets people know that it expects increased emphasis on instruction and enhanced results, everyone's sights are raised. The public expects more from its schools. Teachers expect more from their students. Administrators expect more from their staff.

Through effective instructional management, people know what is expected of them. And, because the goals are clear and the steps toward attaining them are plotted precisely and are monitored, those expectations usually are achieved. Most important, the process results in bridging the gap between "what is" and "what might be." ■

A policy statement supporting effective instructional management

Mission: To help students grow to reach their full potential as they become productive, contributing members of society.

In order to fulfill this core mission, everyone associated with the school system must unite in support and encourage the development of one another.

Overriding Goal: To increase student achievement in all areas, but particularly to raise our standardized test scores to the highest in the State of West Virginia by 1987-88.

Overriding Goal: To operate more efficiently and effectively in everything we do. (Another way of stating this would be to eliminate waste and raise productivity.)

Overriding Goal: To foster an exiting and fun educational climate where all students and adults feel proud to work alongside caring professionals.

Mercer County Public Schools, Princeton, W. Va.